

## The Impact of COVID-19 on International Higher Education: New Models for the New Normal

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**Abstract:** COVID-19 has had a major impact on international higher education with border closures, cancelled flights, and a shift to online teaching and learning. As a result, many international students have decided to either abandon or defer their plans to study abroad. If students stay in their home countries, many institutions that rely heavily on foreign students' fees will suffer, with potential impacts on national economies. Beyond the economic implications, it is also important to consider the personal impact of COVID-19 on international students, who may face delays or obstacles to program completion, employment and/or immigration. Though there are certainly risks and losses in the short term, the demand for international education, and the benefits it offers, are expected to grow. This presents an opportunity for higher education institutions (HEIs) and governments, not just to lessen the impact of COVID-19 on their current business models, but to explore new models and opportunities. HEIs and governments must look at redefining international higher education for the new normal, which will entail a shift in policies and programmes. This paper outlines the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for international higher education and presents potential opportunities for governments and higher education institutions to refresh and redefine their approaches for the new normal.

**Keywords:** International Higher Education, Internationalisation, Higher Education and COVID-19.

### Introduction

International higher education is only a small part of the higher education sector with just over 2% of students who are mobile. However, according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, there were over 5.3 million international students in 2017 and the numbers continue to grow (UIS, 2019). Canada's international student population has tripled over the past decade to 642,000 in 2019, moving the country into third place behind the US and Australia (El-Assal, 2019). Global higher education is also a huge industry valued at USD 65.4 billion in 2019, and projected to reach USD 119.95 billion by 2027 (Verified Market Research, 2020). In 2018 international students in Canada spent about \$21.6 billion in accommodation and fees, sustaining 170,000 jobs. Foreign students also contribute approximately \$6 billion a year in tuition to Canadian universities and colleges, comprising half of all tuition revenue (Global Affairs Canada, 2019).

COVID-19 has disrupted international higher education. As a result, an estimated four in 10 students will cancel or defer their plans to study overseas because of the pandemic (QS, 2019). If students stay in their home countries, institutions that rely heavily on foreign students' fees will suffer. Research and STEM programmes will be particularly hard-hit, as they are often subsidised by international student fees, and many mid/low ranking universities may face insolvency and collapse (Fazackerley, 2020). Moreover, studies have shown that declines in student enrolment are associated with declines



in GDP in the UK (Ahlburg, 2020). As such, despite the relatively small proportion of international students in higher education, COVID-19 has the potential to negatively impact entire institutions and national economies.

Beyond the economic impact it is also important to consider the personal impact of COVID-19 on international students. International students are not a homogenous group: they have distinct motivations for pursuing international credentials. Wealthier students often seek an international cultural experience and the prestige of a top-class degree, while middle-class students' priorities link more directly to livelihood opportunities. COVID-19 may impact the timeline of academic completion, employment and/or immigration for international students who defer or cancel their studies. Those who do continue their studies may be faced with challenges regarding access and the quality of their experience. According to The College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College, less than a quarter of American universities will teach fully or mostly in person Spring, 2021, while another quarter are still undecided (CCI, 2019). As classes move online, international students will lose out on the cultural immersion and networking opportunities that study abroad offers. Those that return home while studying online through a foreign institution may face high Internet costs, and inconvenient schedules, all while paying the same tuition fees.

Given the importance of international higher education from an economic and personal perspective, and the uncertainty of the HE landscape in the COVID-19 era, it will be necessary to revisit existing definitions and models of international education. Is this the time for universities to pivot their business models and look for innovative approaches? What measures can institutions take to not only address the immediate risks posed by COVID-19 but to bolster international education and its benefits in the future?

### **International Education as a Locus of Soft Power**

International education is recognised as a significant tool of soft power, which can generate a positive image and increase national influence abroad. Colin Powell said of higher education in America: "I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here" (2001). A report by the Centre for International Policy Studies and The Munk School of Global Education presented global education as an immediate and urgent need to strengthen Canada's international power, underlining the importance of an ambitious educational strategy to enhance the country's influence in international affairs (The Study Group on Global Education, 2017). This is even more pertinent in a polarised world, where international understanding is critical. Cultural immersion and the exposure to the values and customs of a host country cannot be easily replicated in a virtual or online format. While travel and face-to-face learning have been limited by the pandemic in the short term, countries must develop innovative and strong policies that promote and facilitate international education, including scholarships, exchanges, and immigration pathways for future graduates.

Scholarships for international study not only generate lasting goodwill towards a host country but also facilitate intercultural understanding and networking, which are key in strengthening a country's soft power. For example, the UK invests in Commonwealth scholarships, which bring people from erstwhile colonies to study in Britain—these become a powerful glue which binds the bloc of 54 countries, and can be a powerful force at international forums. While most of these scholarships are

for face-to-face programmes, there is also specific funding for select online programmes, which is particularly relevant for the short-term future in which distance education has become the norm for many (Commonwealth Scholarships UK, 2020). Such programmes can facilitate international study, both in person and online. And these study-abroad opportunities should be encouraged both ways. Sending students abroad can foster appreciation of the globalised world and develop the cultural intelligence and cultural quotient of future leaders to successfully navigate this landscape. Universities that typically received international students should also consider how they can better integrate international travel opportunities or requirements into degree programmes for domestic students and strengthen mechanisms for sponsored study and exchanges with foreign institutions.

More than 58,000 former international students have become Canadian permanent residents, and research shows that international students who become residents have excellent economic outcomes; moreover, they often maintain connections with their home country, which has an implication for Canada's status and reputation globally (El-Assal, 2019). Since the onset of the pandemic, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada has made several temporary policy changes to support and reassure international students and learning institutions. The Canadian government recently announced a policy that international students who begin their studies online from abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic will still be granted postgraduate work permits for an equivalent period (Government of Canada, 2020). This strengthens the likelihood of successful immigration applications down the road by boosting their Canadian work experience. These kinds of immigration policies will be crucial for strengthening international higher education as a locus of soft power, especially in the COVID-19 era.

### **International Education in Flux**

More than half of international students enroll in six countries: the US, the UK, Australia, France, Germany and the Russian Federation (Symonds, 2020). Currently, more than 50% of Canada's international students come from only two countries: India and China (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Of the 1.1 million foreign students in the US in 2018, 34% come from China alone, representing USD 11 billion in fees (Symonds, 2020). However, COVID-19 will disrupt these patterns, as more students opt to stay closer to home. A recent survey of high school counsellors in China reported that 87% of students and parents are reconsidering plans for studying in the US (Wan, 2020). As a result of COVID-19 the priorities of learners and their families have changed, and in fact, even prior to the pandemic they were starting to shift. Geopolitical factors, along with increasingly restrictive immigration policies, unrest and gun violence may have taken away some of the shine from American institutions, where a growing number of international students are looking for alternative options.

Countries can leverage their reputations, amid shifting priorities, to emerge as preferred destinations for international students. A survey of Indian students found that the three key factors that determined their choice of destination were safety, employability and reputation (QS-I GAUGE, 2020). Similarly, a Canadian Bureau for International Education study found that international students choose Canada due to the high quality of education, as well as its reputation as a tolerant and safe country (2018). Targeted campaigns that promote destination countries, based on these factors, could help to seize a market in flux. Moreover, there is an opportunity for countries that were traditionally 'senders' of international students to become host destinations, though this requires strategic planning. For example, in India the new National Education Plan aims to transition the country from

being a 'sender', to becoming a retaining and, eventually, a destination country for students in the region, a prospect boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020).

While shifting hierarchies present an opportunity for countries like Canada and India to capture major markets, it will also be important for institutions to attract learners from diverse countries. Between 2017-2019 the country with the largest increase in international students in Canada was Morocco (58%) followed by the Philippines (54%) (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2019). These emerging markets will be key as HEIs look to attract more learners. Students from Africa, with a young population, a median age of 19, and a rapidly rising middle class, have preferred to go to Europe and the US (Schulman, 2017); they could be an important new constituency for countries like Canada but this will require a proactive approach. Governments and HEIs will need to develop more diverse student recruitment strategies to reduce their dependence on single countries and leverage a positive reputation to capture a shifting market.

### **New Models for the New Normal**

Though online learning has become mainstream as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is predicted that international students will continue to seek overseas experience at foreign campuses (QS, 2019). What kinds of models might emerge that can balance mobility restrictions and concerns with the demand for international experience? As HEIs were forced to shift to distance and online learning during COVID-19 lockdowns, we have seen how important distance education is for the resilience of higher education. Distance learning allows students to study without coming to campus. For international students this means that they could, ostensibly, earn a Canadian credential from their own country – an option that may become more mainstream in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods. Open Universities (OUs), like Canada's Athabasca University, already offer countless online programmes and courses, from short Continuing Professional Development courses, to full-fledged doctoral degrees. These OUs, and other institutions offering online degrees, have a tremendous opportunity to attract international students who can complete a foreign degree online, from their home country. However, many international students enroll in foreign institutions because they want the international experience and the pathways to employment and immigration that this experience affords them, so it is unlikely that online education will replace campus-based instruction entirely. As such, universities should look at hybrid programmes that allow partial completion through distance education along with a period of on-campus study. Overseas branch campuses could be an alternative model. By reducing market proximity, branch campuses could offer quality international education while reducing the need for travel. For example, RMIT University, based in Australia, has two branch campuses in Vietnam, that cater to learners in Asia who may not want or be able to relocate to Australia for study. These branch campuses provide an opportunity for students to experience 'internationalisation at home'. For face-to-face instruction, HEIs will also need to consider how they can accommodate more students to increase their revenues. By extending hours (i.e., more early morning, evening, and weekend classes) and offering blended options, HEIs will be able to cater to more students while maintaining small class sizes, often a quality marker for prospective learners and their families. In any of these models, flexibility and agility will be crucial as institutions must be able to adapt to changing realities and regulations.

## **Facilitating Mobility in the COVID-19 Era**

Another important development in the wake of COVID-19 will be the expansion and facilitation of credit transfer, so that learners can transfer credits from an institution in their home country towards a credential in another country. Credit transfer, even within the same country, can be challenging due to overly complex processes, ambiguous policies, or a lack of clear guidelines. Students may lose credits when they transfer from one institution to another, which may prevent them from transferring, or lead to increased costs or delayed graduation (Logue, 2017). Qualifications frameworks are important tools to facilitate mobility between countries with different education systems and qualifications. Improved articulation agreements between universities and transnational qualifications frameworks will be required to promote mobility of students in the wake of COVID-19. COL's initiative The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, has developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) which facilitates international credit transfer. Officially launched in 2010, the TQF allows millions of potential learners to access internationally recognised programmes through a simple process, helping learners and workers that move between countries. Internationally, there have been efforts to enhance mobility and recognition of credentials through the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education 2019, which was adopted in November 2019, only a few months before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. The Global Convention will now be open to ratification by interested UNESCO Member States, and if ratified, it will facilitate student mobility and support international cooperation for recognition of higher education qualifications (UNESCO, 2019). As new business models for higher education emerge, and as prospective students' and their families' priorities shift, it will be important to facilitate mobility.

## **Vocational Training and Informal Learning**

Universities have always had a 'third mission' to address societal needs and market demands but this mission has taken on renewed importance in the context of COVID-19 and its economic fallout. The ILO has warned that globally 25 million jobs could be lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). Driven by the common understanding that education can lead to economic benefits, citizens often enrol in education or training to boost their chances of finding employment or to enhance their income generating opportunities. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has shown that 80% of students gain financially from attending university – so when the need for economic growth is the greatest (during recessions and economic downturns), we may see an even greater demand for education in order to improve livelihood prospects (Drayton & Waltman, 2020). Moreover, as some occupations and industries lose relevance and others emerge as essential, there will be a need for extensive reskilling to meet labour market needs. Even in occupations which are not affected by closures or mass layoffs, upskilling will be required.

The economic recession caused by COVID-19 presents an opportunity for HEIs to develop a new, complementary niche that fulfills the emerging demand for livelihood skills. Through their experience and expertise HEIs can deliver both academic qualifications as well as more skills-based, vocational, or 'practical' learning to both domestic and international students. This provides an enhanced revenue stream, aided by the growth of blended and online learning, which captures different demographics, such as older adults. At the same time this approach increases access to desperately needed education and training for a changing labour market, which can aid national economic recovery.

HEIs will need to develop international partnerships and offer flexible pathways and approaches to address the needs of older adults. Shorter, online, or blended courses will become important for flexible training, which can award micro-credentials that can be stacked towards larger credentials. Australia is moving in this direction at a national level, offering funding for short online courses in areas deemed national priorities to “enable people, rather than bingeing on Netflix, to binge on studying” (The Economist, 2020, n.p.). Online education providers, like Coursera, have already carved out a niche for themselves in this area. In partnership Coursera and the Commonwealth of Learning are offering free licenses to thousands of unemployed Commonwealth citizens through the Workforce Recovery Programme. The programme, designed to skill and reskill citizens of Commonwealth Member States for livelihoods, held its first ‘Virtual Convocation’ in August to celebrate the more than 3,000 learners in Africa who earned certificates through the programme. Tech companies, from Microsoft to Amazon, are also getting in on this model, offering online training in specific skill areas linked to labour market needs. Not only do these kinds of short courses offer flexible options for skills development, they also help build necessary soft skills like resilience, self-directed learning, and time management, which are applicable to a range of economic and social activities. Universities must look at ways of tapping into this opportunity as the demand for skills training increases in the economic aftermath of COVID-19.

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has disrupted international higher education. In a pre-pandemic world, international education offered important benefits to learners in terms of cultural experience and economic opportunities; to institutions, as a major source of revenue; and to governments as a locus of soft power. Though there are certainly risks and losses in the short term, the demand for international education, and the benefits it offers will continue to grow. Meeting this demand in the face of the complex challenges presented by COVID-19 will require a new definition of international higher education, and innovative hybrid models. These new models could become disruptive innovations and gain market footholds beyond the pandemic. Crises stimulate disruptive innovations, and during times of crisis, disruptive innovations move more rapidly from margin to mainstream. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for governments and HEIs to develop and fast-track the adoption of disruptive models of international education that offer creative and sustainable solutions for the post-pandemic world.

There is an opportunity for governments to value and position higher education as a national asset. International students contribute to the economy in terms of fees to institutions and benefits to the services sector. The diverse body of students who decide to become residents help make the economy more dynamic and innovative, while those who return to their home countries become permanent ambassadors. Governments can develop enabling policies and regulations to promote internationalisation, offer incentives to attract students from a wide range of countries and ensure that more of the home students have opportunities for studying and working abroad. Canada’s International Educational Strategy 2019-2024 and interim provisions made during COVID-19 are good examples. International education should be linked to national policies of foreign affairs and trade and governments must provide an enabling environment for immigration and employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers institutions the opportunity to revisit their business models. As more students now accept online learning, there is an opportunity to build hybrid models that can reduce

costs and provide more flexibility. Reliance solely on the revenues generated by incoming foreign students may not work in the future. Institutions need to take a much more proactive approach to establishing their presence in other countries and strengthening national and international partnerships. Branch campuses, twinning arrangements and hybrid provision could be some of the ways forward for international education. Student mobility should be facilitated through frameworks and agreements to recognise credentials internationally. COVID-19 has also called into question whether three- or four-year degrees are essential pathways to livelihoods. Shorter programmes, like those offered by private providers, present a more viable option for persons wishing to enter or re-enter the work force. In addition to offering traditional qualifications, universities need to re-package, unbundle and think creatively about offering stackable micro-credentials. Moreover, since the youth population is stagnating in many countries, it is important for universities to re-cast their mandate as a provider of lifelong learning, which is also well prepared to cater to the 'third age'.

The new normal will entail a re-definition of international education and the emergence of innovative models that can increase access and equity, lower costs, and enhance the quality of education for an interconnected and networked world.

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